

Herman Van Den Boom

Belgium

'The Domain of Domestic Diversity'

Introduction and interview by Alasdair Foster

Introduction

[[Suggest leading with image 01]]

[[459 words]]

Over the past year I have interviewed photographers who explore many different ways of thinking about the domestic. What is a house? a home? the relationship of those who live there? In many cases those domestic spaces were found on the edges of society or constructed as private sanctuaries. These were spaces for living *within*. Their exteriors were either hidden or so ordinary as to pass unnoticed.

In marked contrast, this last interview addresses the way in which Belgians build and modify their homes to advertise their personal tastes and aesthetic aspirations to all who pass by. Belgium is situated on the western coast of Europe, bordered by the Netherlands, Germany and France. But here the approach to domestic architecture is in marked contrast to the modernism of the Dutch, the functionalism of the Germans or the traditionalism of the French. Belgians have a strongly individualistic temperament. Indeed, in a country of less than twelve million people, there are three separate linguistic regions. The largest speaks Flemish (the language of the Dutch), most of the rest speak French, with a small corner of the country speaking German. This is not a place where people strive to 'fit in' but rather to stand out, each proud of their individuality.

Herman van den Boom has been cataloguing the domestic architecture of Belgium for 45 years. In particular he has focused on the idiosyncratic way in which semidetached houses are renovated and rebuilt by different owners so that, while the two homes form a continuous structure, each half 'speaks' a totally different architectural 'language'. Is this a celebration of human diversity or a descent into architectural chaos? Perhaps both. It depends on what we consider the nature of domesticity to be: to be a part of a coherently collective group or one of a collection of very varied individuals.

Herman van den Boom was born in [Essen, Belgium](#) in 1950. A photographer, artist and designer, he became a professor of photography later in his career, teaching at the Academy of Art and Design, Enschede, Netherlands (1978–1980); the Higher Institute for Fine Arts, Antwerp (2002); at the Academy for Fine Arts, Maastricht (2003 and 2005) His images are held in many prestigious public collections including the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam; the City Museum of Den Hague; the Museum of Photography in Antwerp; the Museum for Photography in Charleroi; the International Center of Photography in New York; and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Rio de Janeiro. He has received a number of important awards including the Sony Worldwide Photography Award for Landscape in 2010, and for

Architecture in 2014, while in 2013 he received the Prix de la Decouverte of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

Interview

[[Interview with Herman Van Den Boom (Belgium)]]
[[2,033 words]]

When did you begin to make photographs?

In the 1960s. Initially, I studied industrial design in Eindhoven (the Netherlands) and in Stockholm (Sweden). But two experiences were to make me change direction. The first was an exhibition by Bernd and Hilla Becher [two German photographers who established a rigorous approach to systematically documenting industrial machinery arranged by function and industry as ‘[typologies](#)’]. The second was an exhibition of work by the Belgian surrealist painter James Ensor.

Those two exhibitions made me quit the Stockholm design academy and enrol at the Academy of Fine Arts in Enschede (the Netherlands). I started walking around the streets of Enschede, taking pictures. I [roamed](#) freely, I had no subject matter, no ideas; I just photographed people and things as I encountered them. I documented the world as it presented itself to me. There was no subsequent editing or manipulation of the images.

How did you practice develop?

Later on, I went to Antwerp, Ghent, Paris and London to wander the cities and discover images. In London I visited the Photographers’ Gallery bookstore, which stocked all the exciting new photography publications of the time. Then, in 1973, my images were published in the legendary British magazine ‘*Creative Camera*’.

In 1976, I went to the USA to present an exhibition in New York. While I was there, Cornell Capa selected photographs for the collection of the International Center of Photography (ICP). Later, I drove four times across the breadth of USA from east to west coast photographing [billboards](#) and [drive-in movie theatres](#).

The first of your work of which I became aware is the series ‘Neighbours’ depicting bizarrely incongruous architecture. While [semidetached](#) houses are found in many countries, they usually form a single harmonious whole. How did the houses in these photographs come into being? [[Images 01–06]]

There is a saying that ‘every Belgian is born with a brick in his stomach’ ... As soon as they can, Belgians will start to build their own house. The Belgian psyche is very individualistic. Traditionally, most of the houses built here are private property. There is no collectively owned property, no big housing corporations, and hardly any [social housing](#).

Do these strange double-houses arise from some peculiarity of Belgian planning regulations?

Not really. The building regulations in Belgium are, in principle, much the same as those in the surrounding countries. It is Belgian individualism that makes these houses so different. Belgium has been occupied by many foreign regimes over hundreds of years... we have learned to be very 'creative' in interpreting rules and regulations!

[[Images 04]] For example, the original building in image 04 was probably a small farm, which may date back as early as the sixteenth century. Later it was split, and the two parts sold separately. The regulations did not allow the building to change too much from the original, because the houses are situated in a rural environment. However, in choosing very different building materials and colours, each owner was able to express their individuality. The result becomes a bizarrely beautiful surreal object.

What made these houses interesting for you?

I was born in a semidetached house on a street which spanned the border; one part of the street is in Belgium and the other part is in the Netherlands. My grandfather was a Belgian architect who didn't like Dutch architecture. My father was a Dutch architect who didn't like Belgian architecture. My grandfather built a [Belle Epoque style](#) house; my father built a modernist one. I think it is in the blood!

Do you see this series as a kind of 'scientific taxonomy'?

These frontally composed images go beyond simple documentation, they are a multi-layered artistic exploration of society in terms of 'personal space'. This is architecture as an expression of history and culture and not simply individual tastes in design. It reflects an attitude to life. People want to build their personal paradise.

Do you think that is a particularly Belgian trait?

Belgium is a rich country. Belgians spend a lot of money on their house and use expensive building materials. In general, houses in Belgium are bigger than they are in neighbouring countries such as France, Germany or the Netherlands. This scale only serves to magnify the extreme Belgian individualism. The results are domestic structures you could hardly dream up. But don't forget that Belgium is the home of the great surrealist painter René Magritte (1898–1967). We are living in the land of Magritte and here reality *is* surreal!

Do you interpret these houses as the result of defiance or tolerance?

These contradictory and irrational architectural partnerships are born of chance. While these double houses are stuck together, they were never *planned* as a pair. Every house is the expression of an *individual* will and taste. Therefore, they are monuments to tolerance.

Tell me about your series 'Wachtgevels'. [[Images 07–09]]

These are houses seeking a partner for life. 'Wachtgevels' is the official architectural term for the wall of a house awaiting connection to another house to form a semidetached pair. Since it will be connected to another building, this wall has no windows or doors.

These blank facades create a kind of absurd 'sculpture' in the landscape. They wait blankly for a partner that will bring an even more absurdly idiosyncratic dream reflecting the aspirations, aesthetics and philosophy of its owner.

[[Image 07]] The little farm in image 07 is set in a romantic landscape reminiscent of the paintings of Pieter Bruegel (c1525–1569). The farm was built in the nineteenth century. All along one side is a blank façade waiting for a neighbour to come. But that will never happen, because the planning regulations nowadays do not allow any new building in this rural area.

In 'Arcadia Redesigned' you explore the ways in which individuals mark the perimeter of their property and the 'landscape architecture' of gardens and forecourts that strive to give the domestic a personal signature, an aesthetic sign to the outer world of who lives here.

[[Images 10–13]]

This is how people deal with 'nature' these days. The traditional landscapes that dated back to Roman and Celtic times are being completely renovated. It is not simply the big forces of urbanization, globalization and pollution, but the individual actions of amateur gardeners who each shape their own notion of [Arcadia](#). Native oak trees that are centuries old are cut down to make way for new imports such as a Japanese Ginkgo tree. Authentic vegetation is replaced by fashionably contemporary plants. The new garden will be decorated with imported rocks, imitation Roman amphoras and faux Egyptian sculpture.

The patina of age is sandblasted away. The landscape is 'modernised'. History becomes simulation. Here you experience the landscape as a surreal illusion of nature, where everything is out of context.

What is it in particular that attracts to you to the scenes you have photographed.

I don't 'capture' an image; the image captures me. These images are discovered not made. Through them, the unreal character of everyday reality is brought to the surface. In that respect, my work is [conceptual](#). It offers insight converted into form; the underlying thought process provides a structuring dynamic.

[[Image 10]] You can see this conceptual contradiction in image 10. As I have said, Belgians are very individualistic. Privacy is very important for them, but they are also very [curious](#). For me this picture reflects this duality.

The images do have a strongly ironic quality...

I just select something which is already there. If the pictures are ironic, that is not my fault... (laughs)

Bruno Chalifour has suggested that your photographs should be “approached as metaphors questioning the way we are and live as human beings.” Is that how you intend them to be seen?

Yes, that is certainly one way of looking at them. I try to make my photographs as ‘value-free’ as possible. They are about ‘seeing’ not interpreting. People perceive their surrounding through their [mind’s eye](#). They don’t always see its irrationality. All Belgians know these semidetached houses, when they see them in my photographs they recognise the absurdity. Actually, it can be the first time they consciously see it.

You have said that you do not think like a photographer. What do you mean by that?

My thinking about photography is related to Belgian surrealism and conceptual art. My photographs are [objets trouvés](#) and [readymades](#). They are intended to function as art objects rather than sociological documentaries or political studies.

These are not technically difficult images to make. Everybody should be able, with a minimum of technique, to make my pictures. I don’t stand on a ladder or get down on my stomach to look for an interesting angle. I do not use photoshop.

I am like a flâneur. [Described by the French poet and art critic, Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), the flâneur is a person who strolls around the city with no particular aim, enjoying the life and sights of the street without judgement.] Baudelaire described it this way:

“To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world ... The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his [incognito](#).”

What kind of response to your work do you get from the public?

I hear from people that, because of my photographs, when they drive through Belgium they look at our country in a different way. There was a documentary on television about my photographs of Belgian houses, so my pictures are widely known. There is already a kind of ‘Van den Boom’ style, photographers advertise and sell ‘look-alike’ pictures on the internet.

What is the most surprising response you have had to your work? [\[\[Images 01–06\]\]](#)

In the Netherlands urban planning is very uniform and the houses there are actually quite boring. Dutch regulations are very strict and there is not much room for differences in interpretation. My father was the director of the architectural department of Philips (the electronics company) and they built sixty thousand houses in the Netherlands, all practically identical.

A lot of people protested against this severe uniformity. One of the Dutch political parties was in favour of changing this strict urban planning policy. They said that Belgian houses could be seen as an example of just how beautiful the Netherlands could be. However, another opposing political party argued that the kind of Belgian domestic disorder was the very reason they did *not* want this.

At the time, I had just published my book *'Neighbours'* showing the strange pairing of styles in Belgian semidetached houses. Ironically, both parties ordered the same book to show to the minister as evidence of their opposite points of view. One party saw the book as demonstrating the Belgian imagination while the other party saw it as evidence of chaotic disorder. I thought it was hilarious!

Do you think your work has a satirical dimension?

In 2011, I made a series of images about drainpipes. About the way they are constructed in Belgium, running alongside the houses. I thought one could perhaps think of them as a metaphor for Belgian politics. This is a country made up of two parts, each with its own language: French in the south and Flemish in the north.

What are you working on now?

The most recent series is about Dutch watch-towers. **[[Image 14]]** They were constructed in the 1950s during the **Cold War** so that the authorities could stand there with binoculars, looking out for Russian aeroplanes. In twenty-five years of looking, they spotted only one Russian aeroplane and that had lost its way returning home from an **air show** in Paris. Originally there were 300 towers, now there are only seventeen that remain. I have photographed each one.

You have photographed in many countries over many years. What, through the making of images, have you learned about yourself that you would not otherwise have come to understand?

Crossing borders is part of my culture and artistic approach. What, in one culture, is considered to be an important issue, fact or belief can, in another, be viewed as hostile. This is what I learned through my encounters: *"The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his **incognito**."*

[[-- ENDS --]]

NOTES TO the TRANSLATOR

Idiomatic terms

typologies

a classification according to general type, especially in archaeology or the social sciences

roamed

to roam is to wander about aimlessly or unsystematically, especially over a wide area

billboards

a large outdoor board for displaying advertisements

drive-in movie theatres

an outdoor cinema where vehicles park next to poles attached with speakers to hear the soundtrack of a film projected onto a large screen at the front of the carpark

semidetached

a semi-detached house is a single family dwelling house built as one of a pair that share one common wall

social housing

housing provided for people on low incomes or with particular needs by government agencies or non-profit organizations

Belle Époque style

Belle Époque is a French term used in English to describe a historical period of artistic and cultural refinement in a society, especially in France from the late 19th century until the beginning of World War I. It was characterised by rich embellishment and curvaceous lines (in contrast to the straight edges and uncluttered designs of modernism).

taxonomy

taxonomy is the process of naming and classifying things into groups within a larger system, according to their similarities and differences

Arcadia

refers to a vision of peace and harmony with nature. Arcadia is a poetic ideal associated with pastoralism and bountiful natural splendour

conceptual

Used here, the word refers to art in which the idea or concept presented by the artist is considered more important than the finished product

curious

Here it means: eager to know or learn something. (It does NOT mean strange and unusual.)

value-free

free from personal or subjective judgement or standards; purely objective.

mind's eye

The way in which our sense of the visual world is constructed from memories and habits and not simply what passes through the eye.

objets trouvés

An art term in French referring to an object found by chance and held to have aesthetic value

readymade

An art term coined by Marcel Duchamp describing everyday objects which the artist presents, completely unchanged, as artefacts designated as art. The readymade object becomes an art object simply because the artist asks us to consider it as such.

incognito

having one's identity concealed; anonymous

Cold War

the state of hostility that existed between the Soviet bloc countries and the Western powers from 1945 to 1990. It was characterised by threats, propaganda, and other measures but did not resort to open warfare.

air show

An entertainment at which aircraft perform aerial displays

Formatting

Bold Italic sentences

Bold and italics are used together for interview questions posed by Alasdair Foster

Italic words

To help understanding of the meaning, italics are used for words that were emphasised in the interviewee's response

'Italic Titles'

Titles for books, video games, photo-series and individual photographs are given in italics with 'single quote marks'

'scare quotes'

Words with single quotes that are not titles are being used in a particular way. The single quotes (known as 'scare quotes') draw attention to the fact that the word is not being used in its most conventional meaning.

[single square brackets]

This is information added by Alasdair Foster to assist the reader in understanding what is being said.

[[double squares brackets in orange]]

This information is for the translator only and should NOT be included in the article when published. Image numbers have been included as a guide for the designer.

Words in blue

These words have explanations for the translator in the grid above

ABOUT IMAGES AND CAPTIONS

ARTIST

TITLE

01

© Herman van den Boom

Veldwezelt

from the series

'Neighbours'

2011

02

© Herman van den Boom

Hoeselt

from the series

'Neighbours'

2011

03

© Herman van den Boom

Tongeren

from the series

'Neighbours'

2011

04

© Herman van den Boom

Zonhoven

from the series

'Neighbours'

2012

05

© Herman van den Boom

Puurs

from the series

'Neighbours'

2012

06

© Herman van den Boom

Soignies

from the series

'Neighbours'

2013

07

© Herman van den Boom

Erps-Kwerps

from the series

'Wachtgevels'

2011

08

© Herman van den Boom

Wareme 2013

from the series

'Wachtgevels'

[year]

09

© Herman van den Boom

Ninove

from the series

'Wachtgevels'

2012

10

© Herman van den Boom

Puurs

from the series

'Arcadia Redesigned'

2007

11

© Herman van den Boom

Rijkhoven

from the series

'Arcadia Redesigned'

2003

12

© Herman van den Boom

Veldweselt

from the series

'Arcadia Redesigned'

2002

13

an image with fake Roman or Egyptian elements?

© Herman van den Boom

Heks(egyptian vase)

from the series

'Arcadia Redesigned'

2003

14

Example of a Watch Tower image?

© Herman van den Boom

Eede

from the series

'Watchtowers'
2018

15

Please supply a head-and-shoulders portrait, looking to camera
Photo credit?

Portrait of Herman van den Boom